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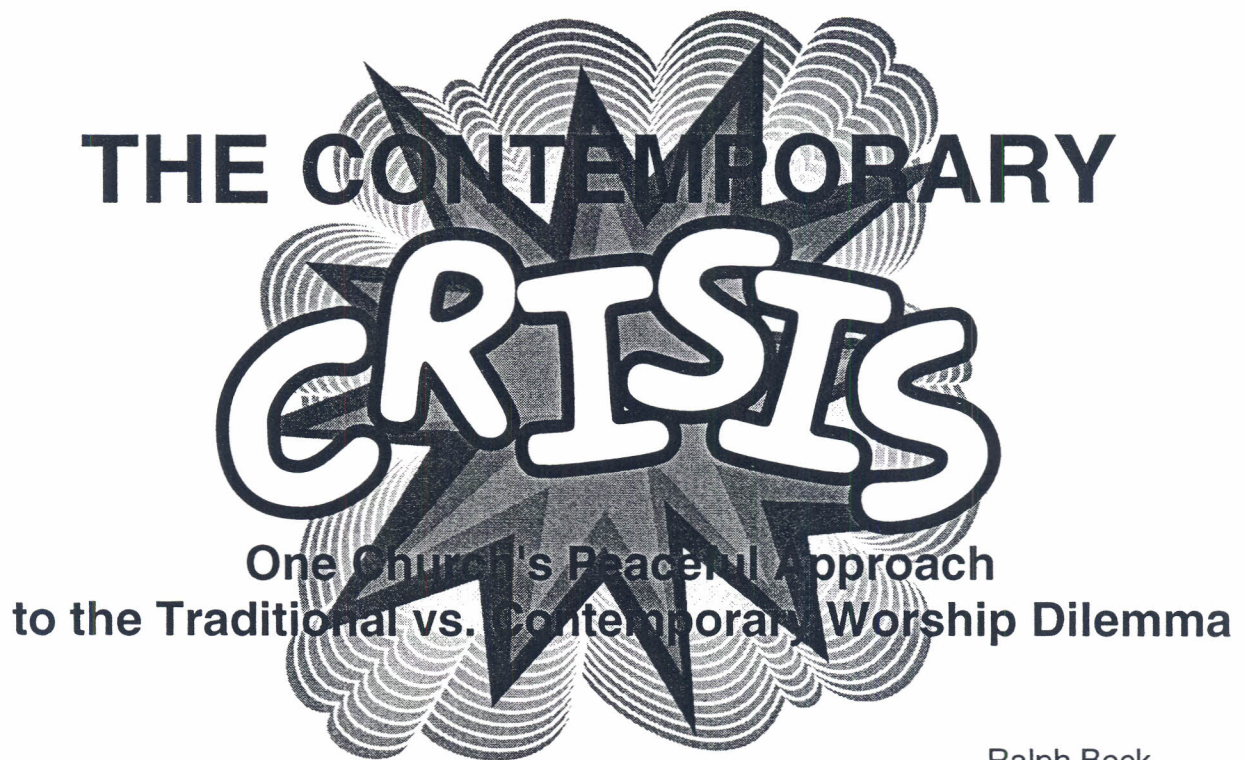
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THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

One Church's Peaceful Approach to the Traditional vs. Contemporary Worship Dilemma

Ralph Beck

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For several generations now, the format and “feeling” (or ambiance) of Sunday morning assemblies among most mainstream North American Churches of Christ has been quite uniform. Local church members who travel make reference to this reality—often in a complimentary manner: “During our last trip, we visited five congregations in three different parts of the country. They do everything just like we do.” Traditionally, the congregational atmosphere in most Sunday morning assemblies of Churches of Christ has been what some would call “reverent.” Others might use the word “sedate.” (Worshippers in predominantly African-American congregations, who have tended to be much more verbally and physically engaged in the worship and preaching experience, represent a notable exception.)

The predictable, undemonstrative approach to corporate worship within Churches of Christ has provided a sense of security and comfort for many members. For others, that approach has become a source of disengagement and discontent. An increasing number of Church of Christ members are visiting other fellowships. They see, hear,

and experience things that “move,” “encourage,” or “convict” them; they long for comparable experiences in the assemblies of their own congregations. Additionally, the awareness that unchurched people are being drawn to such assemblies motivates evangelistically minded Church of Christ members to strive for change. Another contributing factor is not so visible, but very real. Many Christians, spurred by current sermons, books, and articles to seek a more personal relationship with God through prayer, Bible study, and the practice of other spiritual disciplines, desire a corporate worship experience that more closely parallels the experience of their private or family devotionals—“genuine,” “heartfelt,” “open,” “personal.”

Some churches have begun to integrate into their worship assemblies a more informal, celebrative atmosphere and a greater concern for the flow of the entire worship experience. They have incorporated specific modifications such as the addition of contemporary Christian songs; the projection of lyrics (and more recently, musical notation) on an overhead screen; the amplification of a group of singers, commonly called a praise team or worship team; the occasional clapping of hands during songs with a fast tempo and a joyful theme; the raising of hands during meditative songs; the sharing of personal

testimonies regarding God's active presence and goodness; the use of drama; and the occasional presentation of a "special song," typically sung as a solo or by a small group.

In many churches, the introduction—or simply the discussion—of even minimal change has upset those who wish to retain a traditional assembly. In those same churches, the resistance to—or outright rejection of—change has upset those who wish to incorporate it. Members and leaders who resist changes to the traditional assembly express honest concerns: "So many of these new ideas are irreverent." "We need to be concerned about what pleases God rather than what pleases us." "We would be trading the timeless, great hymns for trendy camp songs." "We will lose our distinctive four-part harmony." "It's denominational." "I don't see the biblical authority for these innovations." "Our worship will become mere performance." "This is simply a ploy to move women into positions of leadership." Our churches must work through the challenge of this "contemporary crisis."

One Congregation's Journey

The church family of which I am a part, the Lakewood Church of Christ in Lakewood, Colorado, is one example of a congregation that has, for the most part, happily and peacefully made the transition from a traditional assembly to a more contemporary one. In telling our story, I will include the mistakes that hindered us in our journey as well as the decisions and steps that moved us forward.

When I visited the Lakewood Church a little over five years ago, my general impression was that the church was ready to shift from a traditional assembly to a more contemporary one. "We just need the right guy [meaning me] to help move us forward." The challenge was one to which my wife and I believed the Lord was calling us, so we accepted.

It was more of a challenge than we had anticipated. There was a noticeable absence of many aspects of contemporary worship that we had come to enjoy: congregational greeting time (hugging and handshaking), contemporary worship songs, testimonies, the occasional raising and clapping of hands, and verbal and visual indications of affirmation during sermons. Furthermore, it appeared that the congregation as a whole was not as eager for change as those who had encouraged our coming had thought. On more than one occasion, my wife wept as we drove home from the assembly—not from anger or re-

sentment, but from an unmet desire to experience the joy of corporate worship and fellowship as we had known it.

What to do? Fortunately, prior to our coming, an area-wide "Day of Praise" featuring Ken Young and the Hallal Singers had been scheduled at our facility for a Sunday afternoon. Approximately one month prior to the event, Ken and I described to representatives from the Denver area churches what the event would look, feel, and sound like. On the day of the event, over eleven hundred people crowded into our building. Ken skillfully directed our singing and pointed our hearts to God—thoughtfully blending contemporary and traditional songs. Groups of medleys—some fast-paced and exuberant, some slower and meditative—were interspersed with prayers, Scripture readings, and devotional thoughts. Song lyrics and complementary visuals were projected onto a large overhead screen. Following our "official" dismissal after four hours of worship, several hundred worshippers spontaneously moved to the front and sang into the night.

The excitement generated among our Lakewood members was tremendous. One of our senior, more traditional members told one of our elders, "This is the best thing we've ever done." "Bingo!" I thought. "We can change our assembly overnight." So during the next three Sunday evening assemblies, I laid out my vision for what our morning assemblies might look like in the very near future.

What a blunder! I had mistaken enthusiasm over a special event that had occurred at a time other than the regular Sunday morning assembly for a widespread desire to incorporate many of the elements of that event into our Sunday morning worship experience. At the end of

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my third message in that misfit series, one of our members publicly asked, "How do I vote against this?" I soon realized that I had misinterpreted the success of our "Day of Praise" experience. If I had it to do again, I would say nothing about future possibilities and, with the elders' knowledge and approval, simply introduce mild changes with minimal comment.

Now what? The elders and I were not willing to force changes that could lead to a nasty split. Nor were we willing to sacrifice the possibility of a more celebrative worship experience, one that could have a great evangelistic impact on our community. We decided to offer a Sunday morning "praise service" separate from our main assembly. It would not be an alternative or "second" assembly; there would be no sermon, no Lord's Supper. Rather, it would be an additional opportunity for us to experience an extended time of praise, using a praise team, and to share personal testimonies and brief devotional thoughts.

When to do it? We concluded that the best time would be during our traditional Bible class hour—immediately prior to the regular assembly. We would continue to offer children's classes and one adult Bible class for those who did not want to participate in the praise service. To compensate for the loss of the adult Bible classes for those in the praise service, we changed our Sunday evening format from the traditional "second preaching service" to a Bible study format. A combined "Bible hour" was provided for the children.

The results were both positive and negative. On the positive side, the many of our church family who yearned for a more expressive worship experience had that desire met, as did friends and neighbors who were frequently invited to that service. Another positive result was a natural "bleeding over" of some of the excitement, enthusiasm, and thoughtfulness of the praise service into the regular worship assembly. Assembly planners and leaders became more concerned about an intentional flow of worship. "Tromp time"—the long periods between worship activities when assembly leaders wait for one another to sit down before standing up to make their treks to the pulpit—was disappearing. We incorporated some of the contemporary songs into our main service. The congregation became more participative. Both laughter and tears were flowing more easily.

There was, however, a negative side. The segregation of those for change from those against change was clearly marked by having the praise service compete with an adult

Bible class—*during the traditional Bible class hour*. The overheard choruses of praise reminded class participants that many of their dear friends were not in class with them now. They were "out there!" when they should have been "in here!" At the same time, a number of people who regularly participated in the praise service missed going to a Sunday morning Bible class. Clearly, some further adjustment needed to be made.

Within a year of beginning the praise service, our leaders formulated a new Sunday morning schedule. Our praise service was reduced from forty-five minutes to thirty minutes and preceded the Bible class hour. It worked beautifully. Praise service participants were back in Sunday morning Bible class, and both groups were happy. We used that schedule for approximately one year.

During that time, another significant change occurred. We had been projecting the words of our songs onto a screen during the praise service. We had continued, however, to juggle two sets of songbooks (one traditional and one contemporary) during the main assembly, because the absence of musical notation in overhead projection was a concern for many of our people. Then we discovered of the possibility of projecting both words and music onto our large screen. Suddenly, the main gathering had even more of the flavor of our praise service. Songs were grouped in thematic medleys. Songbook numbers were no longer announced. More contemporary songs were sung. Members and visitors alike responded favorably.

Approximately one year later, for a special bring-a-friend Sunday, our elders gave permission for our praise team to sing a few songs from the back of the auditorium immediately prior to our assembly. As they sang, we projected slides of our church family members in various settings on the overhead screen. For the benefit of our guests, who would be unfamiliar with our worship songs, our praise team continued to be amplified during our congregational singing. The unsolicited response of both members and guests was overwhelmingly positive, leading to the incorporation of the praise team into our regular assembly.

Soon after that decision, the elders began discussing whether we should continue to have a separate praise service or whether it should be incorporated into the main assembly. From those discussions, a new plan emerged. We terminated the praise service and extended the main assembly from an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half. Following a brief fellowship (stand and greet) pe-

riod, the first twenty minutes were devoted to a “season of worship.” There was opportunity for occasional testimonies. The “season of worship” typically segued to the Lord’s Supper. The new schedule was well received and continues today.

Guidelines for Healthy Transition

Based on both my observation and my experience, I believe that the following seven guidelines are vital to a healthy transition.

1. Church leaders, both official and unofficial, must have a desire for change or at least a common perception that change is necessary to achieve the church’s purpose and mission.
2. A significant number within the congregation must also desire change. The larger this number, the easier and smoother the transition.
3. Church leaders must be both persistent and patient. It is quite possible for churches to achieve significant, positive results by taking small steps toward change. Conversely, it is easy to venture too far too fast and bring about disaster. It is unwise for any church to try to mimic exactly the specific steps and time line of another church. Every congregation has its own set of dynamics that will impact what, when, and how changes should be introduced.
4. The congregation must have members who are gifted—and willing to serve—in ways that will support desired changes. To constructively integrate a praise team, for example, the congregation must have at least a few reasonably accomplished singers.
5. Leaders must realize that they cannot “educate” the entire congregation into feeling good about potential changes. They commonly assume, “We just need

to teach our people why these new things we’re planning to do are important, then they’ll come on board”; in fact, those reluctant to change tend to bristle at that approach. On the other hand, when allowed to simply *experience* something a little different, those members will often accept, and even enjoy, what is new.

6. To members who express concern, leaders must lovingly, confidently articulate the reasons for present changes. They must especially be prepared to affirm the congregation’s commitment to biblical authority.
7. Leaders must be emotionally prepared for the possibility that at least a few members will not accept any changes in the assembly. At Lakewood, three couples left us at various points in our transition. Although the tender hearts of our shepherds were hurt, that hurt has been softened by the overall high morale within the congregation and the many who have come to us—and continue to come to us—because of our more contemporary, celebrative assembly.

If there are any tears on the way home from church these days, they are tears of joy. My wife and I would rather be with our Lakewood family on Sunday mornings than with any other group in the world. We praise God for filling our hearts, as well as those of many others in our congregation, with love and patience. With our contemporary crisis largely behind us, we increasingly focus our energies and attention on our mission—reaching out to others with the saving message of Jesus. Thankfully, the changes in our assembly greatly complement that effort.

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